

## From Undocumented Immigrant to Brain Surgeon

**A**LFREDO QUIÑONES-HINOJOSA, MD, received his medical degree from Harvard, where he graduated with honors. He then completed his residency in neurosurgery at the University of California, San Francisco, where he also completed a postdoctoral fellowship in developmental and stem cell biology.

Now an assistant professor of neurosurgery and oncology at Johns Hopkins, Quiñones serves as the director of the brain tumor program at the Johns Hopkins Bayview campus. He focuses on the surgical treatment of primary and metastatic brain tumors, with an emphasis on motor and speech mapping during surgery. He is expert in treating intradural spinal tumors as well as brainstem and eloquent brain tumors in adults with the use of neurophysiological monitoring during surgery.

Quiñones conducts numerous research efforts on elucidating the role of stem cells in the origin of brain tumors and the potential role stem cells can play in fighting brain cancer and regaining neurological function.

His most recent accolade was being honored with the American Association of Neurological Surgeons' Ronald Bittner Award. He has also received multiple teaching awards.

Quiñones was an illegal immigrant from Mexico. After years of work as a farm worker, he eventually became a U.S. citizen and a renowned brain surgeon. He is the author of *Becoming Dr. Q: My Journey from Migrant Farm Worker to Brain Surgeon*.

**IE: Is there an educator or adviser along the way in your life who encouraged you to keep moving forward despite the obstacles you were facing?**

**QUIÑONES:** There were several educators in my life that allowed me to keep moving despite many obstacles going back to community college.

**IE: When you first came to the United States, you worked on a farm. How did you get to college?**

**QUIÑONES:** When I first came to the United States, I did work on a farm. I wanted to learn English and I wanted a better education for myself so I ended up moving from the fields of Fresno, to a small town in Stockton and began to take English as a second language classes, which then eventually led me to the University of California at Berkeley, and then from

there to Harvard, and now where I am now, as a professor at Johns Hopkins.

**IE: What hurdles did you face learning in a United States classroom as an undocumented student?**

**QUIÑONES:** I faced some hurdles while I was learning English as an undocumented student. I think the most difficult hurdle to overcome was to believe in myself. When people tell you that things are challenging, times are challenging and more challenging times will be coming your way, it's a natural instinct to doubt yourself and I do believe it's okay to doubt yourself from time to time. I think it's healthy, but I think what is not healthy is not to overcome those fears.

As an undocumented student, I think the greatest challenge is to learn how to live the American dream.



Alfredo Quiñones-Hinojosa, MD

And the American dream doesn't necessarily mean you have to be a millionaire or that you have to live beyond your means. It means trying to help others, and that's something we have to inculcate in our future generations.

**IE: How can educators on U.S. campuses assist international students and undocumented immigrants and support immigration reform to make education an opportunity for everyone?**

**QUIÑONES:** I think that educators on U.S. campuses can assist international students and immigrants that are documented or undocumented by not only supporting immigration but also making sure that our youth gets educated, that they never lose sight that the most important thing is the education they get. They can take away your documents, they can send you back to your own country, but at the end of the day, what no one can take away from you is the education that you gain in this country, the ability to think critically, the ability to be innovative, and to be exposed to any credible amount of intelligent

and creative people, and that no one can take away from you.

**IE: Why is immigration reform so important, especially for young people who were brought here to the United States as children?**

**QUIÑONES:** I think immigration reform is important for young people who were brought here to the United States as children or for anybody who wants to come and fulfill the American dream. I believe that immigration helps the United States economically. I believe we are the ambassadors. We can see the perception that the rest of the world has; that we can see the economic turmoil going on in our country; we can see the wars that we're fighting around the world; the way we are being attacked in so many ways; and I do believe we have to build bridges, communicate with the rest of the world and be able to learn from them, share, and continue to innovate and I think that's what has made this country the most beautiful country in the world.

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**ELAINA LOVELAND** is the editor-in-chief of *IE*.